

THE CAT'S CURIOSITY

by

David B. Reid

It is not the function of the government to keep the citizen from falling into error; it is the function of the citizen to keep the government from falling into error.

-- Justice Robert Jackson

Prologue

It was three minutes to midnight and while usually fast asleep at this hour, Dr. Richard Valese was engaged in yet another excruciating bout of clock-watching. This time the clock demanding his attention wasn't discreetly nestled on a bookshelf next to his cherished Cal Ripken, Jr. autographed baseball. He wasn't counting down the seconds, silently praying for time to fast-forward so he could rid himself of yet another emotionally draining patient moaning on about how unfair life was. Instead, with a worried stare through his transparent reflection ghosted in the glass before him, he was mentally willing the hands on the clock on the wall above his patient, to not only slow down, but God help him—stop.

One hundred eighty seconds with some patients feels like an eternity for any seasoned psychotherapist. Tonight, three fleeting minutes converts to about 40 final breaths of life for Christian Ross. At the precise moment when the clock strikes midnight, a lethal concoction of sodium thiopental, potassium chloride, and Pavulon, a heart-stopping paralyzing agent, will drip through IV lines now dangling like speaker wires from Christian Ross's restrained forearm, silencing the life of an innocent man.

All the guilt and shame from oppressive nuns heaped upon a repressed Catholic boy paled in comparison to the self-condemnation and responsibility Dr. Richard Valese felt for the murder he was about to witness.

You kill what you fear, and you fear what you don't understand.

Genesis – Duke's Travels (1980)

Chapter 1 - Nightmare on Elm Street

Building 2560 Fort George G. Meade. Fort Meade, Maryland

March 23, 1977 2:10 P.M. EST

The monitor's voice echoed, as if spoken into the mouth of a cave.

"Let me know when you're there," he said. "Take your time."

There was no reply to the gentle guidance as the young man shifted in his seat, knowing the weight of this covert project fell squarely upon his untested shoulders. The consequences of a failed mission were appreciated: disappointed supervisors, knotted purse strings restricting public and private funding, an embarrassed presidential administration pleading ignorance to any involvement in such a foolhardy project.

He cleared his mind of all invasive distractions, slowing the racing heart galloping in his chest. He inhaled slowly, released warm breath through slightly parted lips, freeing pent-up tension and the swollen lump that had been lodged in this throat for the past 30-minutes.

"Very good," the monitor reinforced. "Center yourself."

The young recruit sighed. "I think . . . I think I might have something here."

"Good . . . stay centered. Can you see the target?"

He shook his head. "Not yet."

A wide belt wrapped around the young man's chest. From it, several wires led to a small television screen displaying up-to-the second seismograph-like recordings of his vital signs. Brain waves were monitored by sensor electrodes glued to his scalp with a translucent conductive gel, each pad precisely positioned: five just below his hairline, six pressed to the back of his head forming the shape of a hexagon, three exactly an inch

above the top of each ear. From each earlobe hung a single wire neutralizing artificial activity from facial twitches or extraneous movement that could be misinterpreted as epileptic activity.

He mindlessly passed a house key from one hand to the other; now and again pressing the sharp teeth into his fingertips, jagged impressions fading as quickly as they appeared.

The monitor's eyes locked on the young man, concerned that those in charge sent him a kid who hadn't been long acquainted with a razor blade.

Flipping through the recruit's file, only a red glow from a dim lamp lighting the small room, the monitor calculated the Private's age to be 18 years, 4 months and 13 days old. "McNALLY, Jason - 11/18/1959" in bold block lettering was centered across the lip of the manila folder.

"Okay," he heard McNally say, interrupting the soliloquy in his mind. "I'm getting something," he said, his eyes shut tight as if blocking out all external distractions.

"I can see people . . . like a small crowd . . . maybe—"

"How many?" the monitor interrupted.

"I can't tell, sir. I'm just getting flashes of people. It's like they're waiting for something."

"Does anything look familiar?"

"No," he said, his voice flat, emotions uncolored. "I don't know this place."

"That's fine. Just let it come to you. Take your time."

The recruit cocked his head, as if straining to eavesdrop on a whispered conversation. "It looks like they're waiting for a parade. They're definitely waiting for

something.”

The monitor sat patiently, still as a calm lake at the crack of dawn.

“What’s the weather’s like?” he probed, knowing visceral experiences can sharpen the senses during remote viewing exercises.

“Sunny. It’s warm. They have sunglasses on. Most of them are in short sleeves.”

“Can you see anything else? Any landmarks or buildings?”

Freeing an imprisoned sigh, the Private said, “It’s like I’m at a park. There’s an open field. Maybe a building or two in the background but nothing’s real clear.”

“That’s fine,” he offered, his disappointment well concealed.

The recruit sat upright.

“What is it?” the monitor asked in response to the recruit’s sudden movement.

“A man’s voice. It sounds like it’s coming from a radio . . . it’s like . . . like a walkie-talkie.”

“Can you make anything out?”

“I’m not sure . . . It . . . It sounds like ‘Lance.’” His eyelids squeezed tighter.

“Lance?” the monitor asked.

“Yes sir, . . . Lance . . . no, wait a minute, not Lance . . . it’s Lancer. He’s saying ‘Lancer. Lancer, right on Houston. Right on Houston. Approaching Elm. Left on Elm.’”

Just then his voiced jumped an octave, filled with excitement. His target was coming into view. He could *feel* it. After all, that’s how viewers do it. They *feel* it. The key passed mindlessly between his fingers pulled him closer to the target. Like a string of yarn to a pawing cat.

“Oh my God! It’s a limo. I’m in a limo. Is that what this key goes to?” he asked,

eyes still shut.

“No,” the monitor responded. “But you’re doing fine. What else do you see?”

The recruit slumped, relaxing his taut shoulders as a reel-to-reel recorder hummed softly in the background, capturing every word. Every word, that in due time, would be put to paper in a summary report for the commanding officers at the Department of Defense. It would serve as the only source of objective data that remote viewing was a viable endeavor and perhaps vital for national security.

“I was right. It’s a parade,” McNally concluded. “Oh my God!”

“What is it, Private?”

“I don’t fucking believe it,” he said, lost in the moment, forgetting that he was in the presence of a commanding officer. “Sorry sir,” he said, straightening in the chair as if coming to attention.

“It’s fine, Private,” the monitor assured him. “Stay centered and let it come to you. Just let the images come to you.”

“I think it’s the President,” he said. “Not Carter,” he clarified. “It looks like President Kennedy. He’s in a limousine . . . there are others, but I can’t make any of them out.”

“Relax son,” the monitor encouraged. “Take a deep breath, focus. Focus on something in the limo. Let go and let it come to you.”

“Okay . . . okay,” he exhaled hard, his body softened in response. He gently tugged on his shirttail, freeing it from his starched and pristinely pressed khakis—a move ordinarily met with an immediate reprimand by any superior officer, but given the unorthodox circumstances of the day, his need to be comfortable was overlooked. “I

think I've got something."

"Stay with it," the monitor said.

"I think it's Mrs. Kennedy. It looks like she's holding some kind of animal on her lap. It's white. Maybe a stuffed animal like a dog or cat, I'm not sure."

"All right . . . very good."

As if straining to move some cumbersome object, he groaned, "It's a . . . Hertz . . . Rent-A Car."

"What?" the monitor asked.

"A Hertz Rent-A Car sign . . . a billboard . . . It's on top of the roof," he said, as images leapt to life in his mind, his eyes beneath closed lids darting back and forth from one phantom object to another. Cocking his head he added, "It sort of looks like it's going to fall off the building.

"I see American flags," he continued. "People are waving little flags."

The monitor, no more than five feet from his recruit, sat in awe of the event unfolding before him. He had been a cautious skeptic from the beginning, but now he watched as Private McNally closed in on the target. It seemed too good to be true. Part of him wondered if this was a set up. Disbelief turned to possibility, possibility to anxiety—the acid rain of life—now corroding his body with a surge of adrenalin. His mind wrestled with these thoughts as Jason McNally floated in a hypnotic trance that mentally transported him to a Presidential motorcade in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963.

An unexpected shriek from the recruit filled the room, cutting through the white noise lull of the reel-to-reel. "NO! Oh my God, NO!"

As if diving for an overthrown football, Jason McNally fell forward, slamming his

upper body and head on the desktop. Two wires ripped from his forehead and dangled freely off his left shoulder.

“What is it Private? Private McNally, what’s going on?” the monitor pressed, uncertain if he should reattach the EEG pads, or leave them be.

“Somebody’s shooting at them!” he yelled and sat upright. “Oh God, NO!” he cried. “The President’s been shot!”

“Easy Private. Are you—” he started, as McNally outshouted him.

“He shot him! Oh my God, there’s blood everywhere . . . Mrs. Kennedy . . . oh God . . . she has blood all over her. It’s everywhere!” Like a night terror victim, ensnared in the cage that exists in the void separating the conscious and unconscious minds, Jason McNally lived the vision. He wiped his soiled clothes, his fingers now sticky with blood that wasn’t there.

The monitor lurched forward, seeking the button to shut down the reel-to-reel. “That’s enough, Private. I think we should stop this immediately.” With a press of a button, he could shut down what could someday become the most sought after recording of the century. That is of course, if Private Jason McNally was indeed tapping into psychic airwaves, traveling back in time to November 22, 1963. Pulling the plug now would be a disservice to his youngest recruit, his team of remote viewers, himself . . . perhaps even his country. Leaning back into his chair, resigned, his decision was made. The reels rolled, like a clock’s sweeping second hand, oblivious, unconcerned, and impartial to the monumental data it was recording.

McNally’s head dropped back to the table. He was like a frightened child in an air-raid drill—sobbing and trembling. With a shake of his head, he directly disobeyed the

order, unaware that his supervisor had silently rescinded the command.

“Oh my God!” he exclaimed, catching his breath between dry heaves. “The smell. Oh God, I can taste it,” he said gagging on his own breath. Thinking his mission was to report every image conjured, every sensation experienced, he pushed himself further. . . “I can taste the blood!”

“Private!” the monitor shouted, now concerned his recruit's mind might morph to some kind of irreversible schizophrenic sludge. “Bring yourself back. You need to bring yourself back now. Back to Fort Meade. Back here to the base. Back to this room.”

McNally defied the order. “Oh God . . . he's dead. The President's dead. He killed him,” he gasped between tearless sobs. “I saw that son-of-a-bitch kill him.”

“Who? Who killed the President?”

Expecting McNally to return to the present as soon as his mind boarded a clairvoyant return flight from Dealy Plaza to a basement office at the Fort Meade complex, the monitor jerked in his chair as McNally called out again. This time, his eyes were wide open. “There are more of them. They have guns,” he said as panic crept back into his voice.

“Who? Who has guns, Private?”

“There!” he shouted and pointed to an empty corner of the room. “Those men. They're going to shoot him. NO!” he screamed, frantically waving his hands as if swatting a pesky fruit fly. “No! Look out! OFFICER! LOOK OUT . . . BEHIND YOU!” he yelled, desperately attempting to forewarn the unsuspecting victim only he could see, as he hurled the key in his hand across the room at two imaginary assailants.

“Private McNally, what are you doing? What the hell is going on!”

“They shot him. They just shot a cop. Oh my God, he’s dead too. He couldn’t hear me. He didn’t see it coming.” The recruit’s head returned to the table. “I can’t do this anymore . . . I’m sorry, sir . . . I just can’t do this.”

The monitor looked to the recorder, its wheels still rolling, knowing the emotionally broken enlisted man slumped before him just remotely witnessed a conspired assassination of the most influential and powerful man in the northern hemisphere. Unlike his uniformed recruit, he also knew the house key just thrown across the room belonged to Officer J.D. Tippett, a Dallas patrolman who was ambushed and gunned down on November 22, 1963 moments after President Kennedy was assassinated.

Employing his own unrefined prophetic abilities, the monitor caught a glimpse into the young man’s future. From what he could see, things did not look good for Private Jason McNally.

Chapter 2 - It's Benjamin Franklin's Fault

Baltimore, Maryland – May 18, 1996

Curiosity killed the cat and I'm that cat's curiosity.

That's what Dr. Richard Valesse said in his sleep the night before meeting Christian Ross. These were also the first words his wife spoke to him after his feet hit the floor that morning.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"You tell me, dear. You're the one who said it."

"What do you mean *I'm* the one who said it?"

Cathy Valesse tossed her head back flipping the thick brown mane off her shoulders, chuckling as if she had a secret she was dying to share. "You said it last night in your sleep. Here," she said, handing him piece of paper. "I wrote it down as soon as you said it. I knew I'd never remember it."

He took the note and read it as Cathy walked back to the bathroom to put a few finishing touches on her makeup. The words perplexed him. "You're serious aren't you?"

From the other room she said, "Sure am. I wrote it down just like you said it."

Valesse shook his head; his wife laughed again, one set of lashes now darker than the other.

"I suppose it's a good thing we don't have a cat."

Valesse was a tall, slender man. Dark hair flecked with gray was the only bit of evidence that he was in his 40s. His cool blue eyes were deep-seated and supported by a

face that held a youthful appearance. His rounded shoulders gave him a relaxed, casual appearance, though beneath the partially slumped posture was a man who could be all business in the blink of an eye. His smile was disarming and he knew it because others had repeatedly told him so: another gift from Mother Nature that he exploited to his advantage when necessary.

By that afternoon, the obscure words uttered in the middle of the night faded from his memory like most of life's mundane happenings. But for some reason not entirely clear at the time, they scratched at the back of his brain—like an annoying song he couldn't get out of his head—during the ninety-minute intake session with his last patient of the day.

Curiosity killed the cat and I'm that cat's curiosity.

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Christian Ross sauntered into Dr. Richard Valese's office at 6:10 P.M. after completing the mandatory paperwork, including a stack of forms that provided the doctor with standard personal data, up-to-date insurance information to ensure prompt payment for services rendered, and perhaps most importantly for the psychologist, the patient's signature below an 8-point font paragraph indicating his consent to treatment. Valese hated paperwork, but he despised lawyers even more. So the necessary evil of paperwork remained an annoyance for all seeking help for their mental health concerns from Dr. Richard Valese.

After buzzing his receptionist to escort his last patient to his office, Valese stood by the open door and waited. He watched what appeared to be a reluctant adolescent slump down the narrow hallway. With a simple nod and forced, "Hello", the boy ignored

Valese's extended hand, traipsed into the office, sat in the nearest chair. Two clinical impressions immediately came to mind: OCD or ODD. If the kid doesn't present with an obsessive fear of bacterial infections, then he likely despises authority figures and meets criteria for an Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Whatever the motive, it will become abundantly clear within the next five-minutes.

Like most patients entering psychotherapy for the first time, this seventeen-year-old was an unsettled bundle of nerves squirming in his chair like a worm on a hot plate. From the fill-in-the blank answers scrawled on the intake forms, Valese discerned the young man lived in Hagerstown, Maryland, and was an unemployed, full-time high school senior living at home with his parents. He looked younger than his calculated age and the blonde, brillo pad mop sitting atop his head bore a close resemblance to Harpo Marx (a reference, if made, would have been lost on the young patient, or at the very least taken as an unacceptable insult). He wore a wrinkled t-shirt with a faded and peeling emblem of some rock band that Valese never heard of. His jeans were loose fitting and slightly bunched above a pair of unsoiled, snow-white tennis shoes.

After a moment of awkward small talk prompted by the autographed pictures of Hall of Fame Orioles displayed on the walls, the young man settled in his seat and cut to the chase by telling the psychologist he was a compulsive hand washer. His chaffed hands revealed the telltale sign of a germophobe, but it was the frequent eye glances to the antibacterial gel on Valese's desk that was a dead giveaway to the emotional turmoil that pained this young man.

He told Valese his fear of germs and infections started years ago. Came out of the blue like an un-welcomed zit on the prom queen's nose the morning of the big shindig.

His ruminations quickly grew out of control one day when he couldn't eat his lunch for fear that he'd swallow some unseen microbe that he was certain leapt off the school cafeteria lady's polished fingernail. He convinced himself that she had just uncorked a glossy red claw from her crusty nostril, and even if his eyes betrayed him, he knew the dirty digit had surely been poking somewhere it didn't belong. He tried to talk himself down like all ruminators, knowing the inner-voice sounding false alarms to all perilous risks in the near vicinity was completely irrational. He knew the truth: *she had to wash her hands. It's the law. She'd lose her fucking job.* But as he prepared bite into his sandwich, his intervention fell upon his own deaf ears. The illogical voice won out, and he dropped the sandwich on his plate then tossed it in the nearest trashcan. From that moment on, he made his own lunches, which of course required no less than ten pre-surgical-like hand scrubs before commencing with a simple PB and J sandwich.

As usual, Valese empathized with his patient, appreciating his was a life of constant torture. Listening to Christian's vain attempts to justify his aberrant behavior, a relevant Shakespeare quote came to mind: *cowards die many times before their deaths.*

It was a quote referenced by Valese on many occasions, as he firmly believed fear to be the primary source of his compulsive patients' troubled lives. He would remind them during their visits to his office that persistent fear tripped most people on a daily basis, while sending others to their premature graves. This kid was no different.

"Christian?" Valese said softly.

"Yeah?"

"I want you to know I understand how difficult it is for you to come in here and bare your soul to a complete stranger, but please understand we're not going to

accomplish everything today. It really is okay to not tell me everything about what bothers you. If you think you might regret telling me something, then don't tell me. Save it for another time."

The boy's expression held a mixture of confusion and relief. What kind of a therapist would tell him to *not* talk?

"Just because I have these diplomas," he continued, his eyes scanning the walls, "doesn't mean you can trust me. You have to learn to trust me."

"Okay," he said with a sigh of relief as his eyes stopped on a large fishbowl containing a collection of marbles. He expected the doctor to ask him if he thought the bowl was half-full or half empty—an overused analytic ploy to deduce one's outlook on life. It certainly didn't house any fish, now or ever from what he could figure.

Staring at the unusual desk ornament, his curiosity got the best of him. "What's with the marbles?"

"Gifts to my patients," Valese answered. "Everyone's lost a few marbles along the way."

Christian wasn't certain if he should be insulted or motivated to earn one. "You'll need more marbles than that if you're going to help me."

Valese laughed. At least the kid had a sense of humor.

"I tell you what. It's obvious that this is a bit uncomfortable for you. Why don't we just deal with simple matters for now?"

"Works for me."

"Your date of birth, right here it says April 30th, 1978. Is that correct?"

"At one in the morning to be precise," he said. "Clocks turned up one hour at that

very moment. Daylight savings time.”

Looking back to the chart Valese said, “I thought daylight savings was the first weekend in April.”

“It is. But it used to be the last weekend in April until the late 1980’s.”

“I see,” Valese said, now knowing more about daylight savings time than he did a few seconds ago.

“So I’m actually an hour older than I look.”

It was an overused joke but it elicited the expected chuckle from the psychologist.

“That’s too funny,” he said placing the file on his desk. The move eased his patient who was clearly uncomfortable with Valese’s intense note taking. “Jimmy Carter instituted daylight savings in the late ’70s, didn’t he?”

“Actually it was 1974 but the idea for daylight savings time was proposed many years before that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Thanks to Benjamin Franklin. He came up with the idea when he was the minister to France. He actually figured that French merchants could save money on candles by getting an additional hour or two of daylight.”

“No kidding,” Valese said. “And it took us all that time before we instituted it.”

“I suppose.”

“So you have Benjamin Franklin to thank for gypping you of an hour from your life.”

Christian laughed. “I’ll have to remember that,” he said then grew quiet as he stared out the window behind Valese.

“What is it?” Valese probed.

He laughed again. “I really don’t take it seriously, but I’ve always had this feeling that losing an hour of my life wasn’t really a loss at all. It’s almost like I moved ahead one free space on a board game. Like I’m an hour ahead of everyone else.”

“So you should be able to give everyone a heads up about what’s going to happen an hour later.” Valese joked.

The comment caught Christian off-guard. He knew his awkward silence revealed more than he intended, but now was not the time to tell Dr. Valese about the intrusive numbers, the premonitions, or the Beatles’ songs he couldn’t get out of his head. For now, he’d take Valese’s advice and keep this one to himself.

Chapter 3 - The Russians Aren't Coming

“What the hell did you say?” the voice on the other end of the line demanded.

“You heard me. I said he's seeing a psychologist. Becky drove him over there about an hour ago. I just found out myself.”

“What the hell is going on, Ross?” the angry voice barked.

“Settle down Malfik, you know about as much as I do. I just got home a few minutes ago, and when I checked my messages I found out she'd taken him to see some shrink. I'm sure it's nothing to get your panties all in a wad about. You know Christian,” he said, though that was less than half-true. “He's probably going out there to talk about his damn germ phobia. I'll keep an eye on things. So don't worry about it.”

An annoyed huff came from the other end of the line. “Don't worry about it? You better hope the only thing he talks about *is* his compulsive behaviors. And you better keep an eye on it. This could really fuck things up, Ross. Who's this guy he's seeing anyway? You have a name yet?”

“Some guy named Balese or Valese, I think. And no, I don't know a thing about the man. I'll get all that from Becky when she gets home. I'll be sure to get in to see him for the next appointment if there even is one,” he said calmly. “And by the way, we both knew this was coming some day.”

“So what's the kid been up to these days? He's not going loony on us is he? The last thing we need is another Jennifer Philips.”

“No, Malfik, he isn't going loony. He talks to Becky more than he does me. But

she'll fill me in. She always does. And as for the Philips girl, this is nothing like that, and you know it. First of all, Christian doesn't have any children, and second, he's not going to kill anyone. Philips was molested by her stepfather, and was fucked up from the get-go. Our mistake was assuming hers was a happy home when it wasn't."

"Point taken. But you better make sure he's not freaking out on us. That's the last thing we need. And you know it."

Malfik was right; Bill Ross knew it. He'd always known it. William J. Ross, "Bill" to co-workers and what few friends he had, had been keeping an eye on things from the very beginning. It was a given that Christian was a special child requiring diligent oversight and monitoring. Research was replete with information on the challenges facing parents of gifted children. And Bill and Becky Ross had their hands full the moment they brought Christian home. Manifesting behavioral idiosyncrasies before his third birthday including a morbid fascination with shoelaces and playing cards provided ample evidence that their child was different.

"Malfik?"

"What?" he answered sharply.

"I already told you the kid's not freaking out on us. And even if he were, you'd be the first to know. Then you'd freak, and I'd have to deal with the two of you."

"Bite me, Ross," he snapped. "You know what your problem is? Sometimes you take all of this too damn lightly. You just don't get it do you? You don't get what we're doing here do you?"

"No Malfik, you're wrong about that. I get it. I know what it's all about. And I also know that you and everybody else down there at DoD still think the Russians are

coming. You guys -"

"No Ross, you're wrong about that. We don't think the Russians are coming. That's done and over with. We won the Cold War. We kicked Commie ass. No one disputes that. But this shit going down in the Middle East, that's another problem altogether. We're going to need people like your kid to deal with the damn rag-heads terrorizing the world. And we don't need this doctor digging around in this kid's head fucking it all up for us."

"Like I said, I'll keep an eye on things. I always have."

"You damn well better, Ross. We've put too much time and energy into this kid to have some quack screw it to hell. This kid could be vital for national security some day."

"Look, Malfik," he said flippantly, never buying the idea that Christian was vital to anything. "I have no clue if Christian can do what you think he can do, or if he has special abilities that no one has figured out yet. I don't know what I believe about him. Maybe I don't believe anything. But I know my job, and whether I believe this supernatural, clairvoyant crap or not, has nothing to do with me doing my job. I'll keep an eye on him. I always have."

"Until today," Malfik added. "Now there's an outsider involved. One we have no control over. And one who hides behind a closed door and confidentiality to do his job controlling people's minds. And that's the last goddamn thing we need."

Chapter 4 - Freud Called It Transference

“Just so you know, I’m not so sure I believe in all that business,” Valese said to his young patient.

“All what business?” Christian asked.

“Clairvoyance. Psychic phenomenon. In some ways, I think it’s nothing other than good educated guessing. Or if it’s some roadside fortuneteller, simply a matter of reading someone’s reactions to what you tell them.”

“I’m not sure what I think about it,” Christian said flatly.

The young man uncrossed his legs, pushed himself back in his chair. He wondered if the doctor would be able to help him with the problems he had yet to mention. He wasn’t certain that his new therapist would take him seriously. His confusion was apparent to the psychologist whose trained eyes casually scanned him from head to toe.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“What’s going on up there?” Valese said, tapping a finger to his forehead. “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know. Nothing I guess.”

“Now I know that’s not true. You can never *not* be thinking something. Our brains are always thinking something. Even during sleep. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But I know something’s going on up there.”

Christian swallowed hard, choking on his own spit.

“You all right?”

Christian nodded, red-faced still coughing, but slowly controlling his fit.

Valese eased back into his chair and brought the barrel of a capped pen to the corner of his mouth, playing the contemplating shrink he tried not to be. “You know, you haven't answered my question.”

“What's that?”

“What were you thinking? Something was going through your head a minute ago, but you pushed it aside.”

The boy sighed and leaned forward, his elbows now digging into his thighs. He grasped his kinky head and started scratching wildly. The room, heavy with silence, was disturbed only by the sounds of a solo head massage.

“Uhgh,” he grunted. “Oh hell, I don't know, Doc,” he said to the floor, his head still restrained by his hands. Valese resisted the temptation to intervene and pressed the pen to his lips as if kissing some holy relic.

“There's so much in here I want to tell you,” he said, squeezing his head. “I really do. But I just don't know. I'm all fucked up. I've been fucked up for so long, I don't think anybody can help me.”

He looked up to Valese, his moist eyes reddened from fighting back tears. “I'm so fucked up. You have no clue.”

Rolling his chair away from the desk, Valese reached for the box of tissues sitting on the windowsill and inched his way to his distraught patient.

“Here,” he said, and handed Christian the tissues. The boy laughed then cried, just

as the psychologist anticipated.

Chapter 5 - If It Walks Like a Duck

“Control people’s minds?” Ross asked harshly.

“That’s right. You heard me. Don’t think for one minute that these guys are anything other than mind controllers. Mental manipulators. They do it under the illusion of helping people. They have more control over their patients than you think.”

“Are we feeling a wee bit paranoid today, Malfik?”

“Just because you’re paranoid, Ross doesn’t mean someone isn’t out to get you.”

“So they say. But I don’t think your suspicions of shrinks are well founded. Now don’t get me wrong, I know we need to check this guy out, but I don’t know that I’d jump to the conclusion that he’s going to control Christian’s mind. I mean just-”

“Just what?” Malfik interjected. “Listen Ross, I’ve had enough personal encounters with them to know that they’re all pretty much the same. They replace one thought with another. Yours with theirs.”

“So is it so wrong to replace the irrational with the rational? I don’t see the harm in recognizing and challenging the irrational thoughts and beliefs that make people a little crazy. Not that I’d ever see one myself, but I don’t think they’re some devious lot who’s out to take over the world by controlling people’s minds.”

“You know what Ross?” Malfik asked rhetorically. “We’re just going to disagree on this one. Who the hell gets to decide what’s rational and irrational, some quack or you or me? Someone who’s lived in the trenches of a dysfunctional family environment who knows how fucked up life can be, or some high and mighty, over-educated judgmental

head-shrinker. I've listened to them, I've talked to them. Hell, they're crazier than we are and they get away with it."

"Bad experience, Malfik?" Ross guessed.

"Bad experience? More like bad *experiences*," Malfik clarified. "I have a twenty-two-year old boy who will have nothing to do with me, thanks to some jackass quack telling him he needed to distance himself from his old man so he could get some space to go find himself. Well the dumb son-of-a-bitch got my son to leave me and his mother, and now he's living god-knows-where in some shit-hole crack house in downtown Baltimore. Then after charging me \$150 for his time, and not his opinion—that's how he justified his bill by the way: 'I charge for my time Mr. Malfik. You pay for that, not my opinion,' he told me. Well whip-de-fuckin'-do. I paid for his precious time. The son-of-a-bitch could have picked his ass for fifty minutes and still felt justified sending me a bill. Then after he fills my kid's head with all his shit, he tells me the biggest problem, as he sees it, is that *I* haven't been there for my son. And if *I* don't change my attitude and my ways about being a father, *I* might as well say goodbye to my son now. You believe that load of crap? The son-of-a-bitch was blaming me! And he wasn't the only one. There were more before him. They're all the same, Ross. Bunch of fuckin' finger-pointing quacks."

Bill Ross didn't know what to say. He too had his suspicions about mental health professionals, but his opinion on the matter was not as personal as Malfik's. He knew very little about Malfik's son, or family for that matter. In fact, he's never laid eyes on Malfik. He'd heard through the grapevine that Malfik's kid was a crack-head, and according to some sources, one grade-A asshole who surprisingly hadn't had his ass

capped by a cop or some disgruntled drug dealer. Malfik had apparently bailed the kid out of enough jams that he was on a first name basis with most of the cops at the county jail.

If Ross figured right, Malfik made life difficult for his son who was now paying him back in spades. But he'd keep his armchair psychology to himself for the moment.

Hoping to be more empathic than he sounded, Ross said, "Yeah, I'm sure that was tough to go through. Who knows, maybe this guy'll turn my own son against me."

"That's not our biggest concern here, Ross. And from what I've gathered over the years, your relationship with Christian isn't much to brag about anyway. It's not like the two of you go out to catch a baseball game and a bite of pizza every weekend."

"Well no, you're right, but--"

"But that's not the point here, Ross." Malfik regrouped, now playing the supervising agent. "We need to keep an eye on your kid and this doctor. You need to find out everything you can about this man. I want to know if he's a card-carrying Democrat, Republican, or if he fucking votes. I want to know what kind of civic organizations he belongs to, if he's a tree-hugger, or a gun toting pro-lifer. Hell, I want to know how often he has sex with his wife or anybody else for that matter - man, woman, or beast. You need to get to know this guy like he's your brother. If you need to send in a mole, fucking do it. I don't want this man screwing with this kid. He could destroy everything. Your ass is on the line here, Ross. So's mine as a matter of fact. So don't fuck this one up," he barked then hung up.

Chapter 6 – A Rude Interruption

Richard Valese wasn't sure what his patient wanted to tell him. He gave up on playing Soothsaying Shrink years ago after realizing his sixth sense usually made no sense at all. The skeleton lurking in Christian Ross's closet would come out in due time. It may not crawl out this evening, but he sensed the young man was struggling to develop a trusting relationship that would permit disclosure of personal, and perhaps embarrassing, life events.

Despite his years of listening to the moans and groans, complaints and rationalizations, and even confessions of rape, murder, and bestiality that due to binding confidentiality he couldn't report to the law, he still hadn't heard it all. In another 30 years, he doubted he would be able to claim that he'd heard it all.

"I'm sorry," Christian said, blowing his nose into a soggy tissue. "This isn't like me. I don't cry in front of people."

"I'm sure this isn't easy, but for what it's worth, you're not the first man to cry in my office." Nodding his head toward the box of tissues he said, "I've seen quite a few people put them to good use."

Christian rolled the used tissue into a ball, tossed it in the trashcan, and yanked another from the box. After drying his now chafing cheeks, and cleaning each nostril one last time, he folded the remaining clean corners, careful not to contaminate his hands with any nose-blow, and dropped it in the can.

Valese reached across the desk, handed him the antibacterial gel, and responded

to his patient's hesitance. "It's okay. Good hygiene isn't always pathological."

The young man laughed nervously, and pumped the handle, dispensing one small dollop of gel into the palm of his hand. He worked the gel into his hands, stinging his chapped knuckles, raw from compulsive hand washings.

"Excessive hygiene that causes your hands to crack and bleed, however, is pathological. We'll do what we can to fix that," Valese assured him.

"Yeah, I hope so," he said. "But I've got to be straight with you, Doc. Not that I haven't been so far." Still massaging his burning hands. "I definitely need to take care of this OCD thing, but that's not my biggest problem."

Valese reclined in his chair. "No? Care to tell me what is?"

Christian interrupted his hand cleansing ritual long enough to check the time on his watch. "I'm not sure we have enough time for me to get into it."

"You're my last patient for the day, and my wife is out with her book club tonight. I'd just be going home to an empty house with nothing better to do other than sort through my mail. So if you have the time, you're welcome to share whatever you're comfortable sharing."

Christian chuckled unexpectedly.

"What?" Valese asked.

The teen hesitated, not knowing how the doctor would respond to what he was about to say. He took a deep breath, crossed his arms over his sunken chest, exhaled, and looked to Valese who waited patiently. As he was about to open his mouth to speak, he was interrupted by an unexpected knock at the door. Christian dropped his head in disappointment, thinking: nice setup. Doc's bailing already.

A puzzled scowl on the psychologist's face told him different. Seems Valse
himself was a bit irked with the untimely interruption.

Chapter 7 - Maid In Heaven

Bill Ross didn't take the abrupt termination of the phone call personally. It was Malfik's way. This was nothing other than Malfik's way of telling Ross he had a job to do. Fortunately for him, it was a job that came naturally, and one he did well. Like anyone who persistently practices anything that is of personal interest, he became quite proficient at his craft.

Every waking day of his life since signing on with Central Intelligence Agency on his twenty-second birthday, Bill Ross has weaved a web of deceit that most think can only be found in a gripping spy novel. Those meeting William Jackson Ross for the first time would learn he is 46, married, father of a seventeen-year-old son, employed as an independent realtor, born and raised in Annapolis, Maryland, and a graduate of Loyola College with a Bachelor's Degree in Marketing and Finance. But only Ross and a select group of people knew that other than being married and having a son, none of the above was true. Even his wife of 22 years was in the dark about her husband's vocation.

Although secretly desiring the life of a professional athlete, Ross didn't possess the physical stature that was necessary to permit participation in competitive athletics beyond high school. What he lacked in height, standing at only five-feet seven inches, he made up for with brute strength. Still a bulky man whose once muscle-bound frame had softened despite desperate efforts to ward off the inevitable cruelty of the aging process, he maintained a rigid exercise regimen including four weekly five-mile jogs and daily weight training in his home gym. He considered a day of rest a day for the weary. Bill Ross had no time to be weary.

His thick head of black hair, showing no signs of thinning, began a gradual graying evolution last summer. His wife thought the salt and pepper look was flattering. He was simply appreciative of secure roots negating the need to rely on baseball caps or Dippity-Do comb-overs. As long as the follicles clung to his skull, he was a happy camper.

Half-heartedly scanning the contents of the refrigerator for a late dinner, he abandoned his mission of finding anything suitable to eat, and headed to the living room where Dan Rather caught him up on the evening news. Alex Trebec followed with his obscure and somewhat sadistic fact-drilling of three adult contestants whose teen years spent in geek-loser-land might finally pay off. After begrudgingly paying a few bills, Bill Ross called his wife before Final Jeopardy.

She answered on the first ring. He had the power.

“Where are you?”

“I’m still at the doctor’s office with Christian. He’s been in there for almost an hour and a-half. I suppose that’s a good sign,” she said, inattentively turning the pages of a worn, thumbed-through People magazine.

“How much longer you think they’re going to be?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess he’s trying to get to know Christian as well as he can.”

That was exactly what Malfik had been afraid of.

Bill Ross thinking: How well? Well enough to figure out everything he and his wife kept from him all these years, or just well enough to help him with his OCD? Even the latter was worthy of concern since he wasn’t sure if fixing the OCD would

interfere with other matters. Would fixing the OCD fuck with the boy's mind? God forbid, he realized. What if it rendered him useless in the eyes of the Department of Defense? Unexpectedly, Bill Ross found himself in a situation that he thought unlikely to ever occur—he was beginning to think like Special Agent John Malfik. *This doctor could destroy everything.*

“Did you meet the doctor?” he asked.

“No. The receptionist took him back to his office. I haven't seen him.”

Ross looked to his watch: 7:50 P.M. He walked back to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator again, as if expecting something that hadn't been there before to suddenly appear out of thin air.

He inspected the shelves as a glow spilled from the refrigerator, providing the only light source in the kitchen. “We don't have a damn thing to eat, Becky,” he said as if the food shortage predicament was her fault.

“What?” she asked.

“I said we don't have a damn thing to eat in this place. I think you need to gather Christian after we hang up, stop by the grocery store and get us something for dinner.”

Becky leaned forward, dropping the People magazine on the floor. Just as she was about to give her husband a piece of her mind (little that remained after living with Bill Ross all these years), the front door to the main office creaked open. A plump dark-haired Hispanic woman in her mid to late 60's tugged a wheeled trashcan behind her. As she turned, still towing the can, Becky noted the white lettering on her bright orange t-shirt: **Maid In Heaven Cleaning Service.** Lowering her voice, Becky spoke through clenched teeth, and offered her husband the same message he would have received had she yelled

at him as planned.

“We’ve already eaten, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to look like a fool and interrupt Christian’s session right now.”

She glanced up, flashed a how-do-you-do grin to the woman who was busy rearranging magazines on an oversized coffee table. The maid nodded back, but gave no indication whatsoever of any interest in engaging in polite small talk. The woman continued to straighten the magazines, aligning them squarely in four solitaire-like columns. Becky noticed her latex gloves, thinking they not only shielded her against infectious agents but allowed an opportunity for her to pilfer whatever she wanted without fear of leaving behind incriminating evidence. *How convenient.*

She was beginning to think more like her husband every day, and she didn’t like it.

“Fine, don’t interrupt them” she heard him say. “But could you at least bring me something to eat?”

She lowered her voice again. “Of course I could, but I have no idea how much longer it’s going to be before Christian comes out. He could be in there for another hour for all I know. There’s spaghetti in the pantry and some sauce and salad in the fridge. For Christ’s sakes Bill, if you can close a \$3.5 million house deal, I think you are quite capable of making yourself a plate of spaghetti.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of encouragement, dear. Maybe I’ll take you up on the suggestion, but just in case I can’t get in the mood to make myself a four-course meal, why don’t you stop by Burger King and pick me up a Whopper, a large fry, and a strawberry milkshake.”

Curtly Becky said: "That's only a three course meal, dear. Besides, think of what they'll do to your waistline."

"I'll suffer," he shot back.

The aloof maid continued to clean the reception area, paying no heed to the spousal spat. Becky watched her empty the only trashcan in the lobby into the larger receptacle. As the woman bent over to put a fresh liner into the smaller can, Becky noticed a pair of thin black wires jutting from the sides of her head. With her eyes, she followed the wires to a black box attached to the woman's belt. She realized she could have yelled at her husband the entire time—Julio Iglesias was probably crooning through the earphones about all the girls he's loved before.

The squat woman walked toward the dark and now empty receptionist office where a double-window separated the support staff from the patients with a nowhere-near soundproof sliding glass partition. From the patients' perspective, it was like gazing into a fishbowl. From the receptionist's vantage point, it was like observing a pack of dysthymic caged animals.

The maid boosted herself on tiptoes and peered through the window. Dropping to a flat-footed stance, she turned and faced the lobby again, scanned the other doors, three in all, then walked toward the one with the black and white sign reading OFFICES.

Becky pressed her chin to her cell phone and said, "Hold on a second, Bill." Moving the phone away from her mouth, she started to tell Ms. Maid in Heaven that her son was still back there with Dr. Valse. Then she remembered the headphones and knew she couldn't complete with Mr. Iglesias. She waited a moment before tending to her husband as the woman jerked the door open, dragging the trashcan like a leashed dog

down the narrow hallway.

Through the closed door, Becky heard a series of loud knocks followed by a man's voice. She heard him say: "Excuse me, Ma'am. I think you've got the wrong office."

Chapter 8- La Basura

“Excuse me!” Valese shouted as the woman proceeded to retrieve the overflowing trash from the can next to his desk.

“I don't think she speaks English,” Christian added with a chuckle.

“I don't need her to speak; I just need her to leave. She should certainly understand me when I point to the door and tell her to get out.” Valese sprang from his chair, clearly frustrated with the rude interruption. The woman, paying no heed to Valese, pulled a plastic trash bag from her side pocket. With a flick of the wrist, the bag parachuted open as Valese huffed then slipped past the inconsiderate intruder. He hooked the large trashcan with the tips of his fingers and dragged it to the door.

“Dispenseme por favor senior,” she said, reaching for the can.

Valese, who didn't speak Spanish, ignored the comment, jerked the can away from her, opened the door with his free hand. Pointing down the hallway, he ordered: “Please leave. Go. You go.”

“Debo recoger la basura,” she said. Leaning over to stuff the new bag in the trashcan, she secured it around the rim and repeated, “La basura, por favor.”

Valese looked to Christian and asked, “Do you speak Spanish?”

“Parlez vous fraincese.”

“Great. You're no help.”

“Je suis desole,” he said, uttering the few foreign words he knew.

Valese dropped his chin to his chest, again pointing into the hallway. “No cleany. No collect trashy. Por favor.” The invented language got a laugh from his patient.

“Debo recoger la basura. La basura,” she snapped back and brushed past Valese, tossing the now knotted and bloated bag into the larger can blocking the hallway.

“You go,” he said, holding the door for her. “You go now. Don’t come back. You no come back.”

She tromped out of his office and angrily pushed the can down the hallway. Valese trailed her to the lobby and watched her shuffle past Becky Ross before she turned and pressed her rump against the front door. She shot an angry glare back at Valese, grabbed the doorknob pressed against the small of her back, gave it a quick twist, and exited the lobby. As the door closed behind her, she shouted something incomprehensible to the two non-Spanish speaking people in the lobby, now exchanging dumbfounded expressions.

Valese looked to the woman with a cell phone glued to her ear, grinned with a polite nod then closed the door and returned to his office.

Chapter 9 - Confidentiality is Absolutely Not Absolute

“What the hell’s going on out there?” Bill Ross asked his wife.

“I think Dr. Valse just kicked the cleaning woman out of his office,” she said. “I think she had the wrong office.”

“Is he finished with Christian?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Lovely,” Ross said. “What in the hell could they be talking about that’s taking so damn long?”

“I don’t know, Bill. What are you worried about?”

Reflexively he said, “Nothing, Becky. I’m not worried about anything.”

“Okay then, why don’t you get yourself something to eat and we’ll see you when we get home.”

He hung up and searched the pantry for the spaghetti knowing there was a better chance tonight that a flaming meteor would flatten him like a squashed June bug than his wife would bring home a flame-broiled burger and side of fries. As he snapped a handful of spaghetti noodles in half, dropping them into a pot of boiling water, the phone rang once. Ten seconds later, it rang again. Only once. To others, it would appear that the Ross’s had an annoying prankster on their hands. To Bill Ross it was a signal for him to enter a private eleven-digit sequence into the phone.

“I’ve taken care of Valse,” the voice on the other end of the phone said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ross asked.

“Someone just paid the doctor a little visit. Let's just say the walls now have ears,” the man said and the line went dead.

Chapter 10 - Number Crunching

“Everything okay?” Christian asked as Valese returned to his chair.

“Well as can be expected I suppose. Now where were we?”

“I think I was getting ready to tell you how crazy I am,” he said.

Valese locked his hands behind his head, leaned back in his chair. “Okay, go right ahead. You have my undivided attention.”

Christian shifted his weight, seeking a comfortable position in a not-so-comfortable chair.

“Well, this is really hard to talk about,” he started.

Valese's facial expression grew serious, interested. He gave every indication that Christian did indeed have his undivided attention.

Just tell him. Tell him and get it over with. No one else will know. Tell him, he urged himself.

The doctor waited patiently knowing silence was all that was needed for the disclosure to commence. Christian looked to the floor like a high diver reviewing the series of twists and spins in his mind before taking the final leap. “I have this problem with numbers,” he said hesitantly.

Keeping his eyes fixed to the floor, he grew silent in anticipation of a response to his bizarre statement. None came. The psychologist sat motionless.

He continued: “It's really weird. I don't know what to make of it. No one does . . . Well actually my mother is the only person I ever told, and she definitely can't make anything out of it.”

“Okay,” Valese replied.

“It’s like . . . it’s like I get these numbers in my head, and until I write them down they won’t go away. They just keep coming back. So I write them down.”

Hands still cupped behind his head, Valese offered a reflective and somewhat canned, “uh, huh.”

“Once I write them down they go away. And never come back.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean. Can you give me an example?”

He broke his stare-down with the floor. “I guess so . . . One of the first times it happened was during my Algebra class. I kept having the numbers 67-42 go through my head. It started that morning as soon as I woke up. I kept seeing 67-42 in my mind and it wouldn’t go away. I wrote the numbers down in my notebook to see if I could figure them out. I thought if I could at least get them on paper, maybe I could get them out of my head. My friend Jason Gallager saw me writing something down and asked me what I was doing. I showed him the numbers and told him they came out of nowhere and that I wasn’t sure what they meant.”

Valese probed: “And you eventually figured them out?”

“No, not me. Actually Jason did. The next morning, as I was getting off the bus, he came running up to me, nearly threw me to the ground and asked, ‘How’d you do it?’ I said, ‘How’d I do what?’ and he said, ‘Know the score of the game.’ I had no idea what he was talking about until he handed me the newspaper and showed me the score of our school’s basketball game the night before. We beat Kenwood High 67-42.”

“And you wrote these numbers down before the game?” Valese asked, still skeptical.

“That’s right. You can even ask Jason. He’ll tell you the story just the way it happened.”

“That’s fine,” Valese said knowing he had no intention of asking Jason Gallager anything. “Was there anyone else around to witness any of this?”

“The basketball score?”

“Right,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“No. But there have been times when other people have seen me do other things with numbers.”

“Such as?”

“Well,” Christian replied, inching forward in his chair then resting one leg over the other. “There was the time I wrote down some numbers on our chalkboard at home that made no sense whatsoever. It’s probably better if I just show you. Can I have a piece of paper?” he asked eyeing Valese’s desk.

Valese tossed him a Post-it note pad. Seconds later, Christian passed the pad back to Valese. “That’s what I wrote.”

The doctor held the note out at arm’s length. “This has a letter in it.” He studied it again and silently read the sequence: 0122198651L.

“I know. Sometimes letters come to me but it’s usually just numbers. In that case, I wrote that down on our chalkboard just before going to bed.”

“Just like this?”

“Just like that,” he said nodding to the paper stuck on the end of Valese’s index finger. “I was nine at the time.”

“Nine? You were nine years old when you wrote this?”

“Yes.”

“So what did it mean?”

“That’s the date and mission number of the Challenger accident.”

Valese squinted. “As in the space shuttle, Challenger?”

“Yes.”

“No way,” Valese said.

“Yes way,” Christian acknowledged. “I wrote it on January 21st right before going to bed. My father was about to erase the board because he needed to write some notes for my mother. But when I started to freak out he left it alone. Of course he thought I was going crazy, and figured it would be best to just leave it be, otherwise I’d be awake all night balling my eyes out and nobody would get any sleep.”

“And your father can verify this?” Valese inquired.

“Sure. So could my mom. She’s out in the waiting room if you want to go ask her for yourself.”

“I wondered if that was you mother out there. I should at least introduce myself. C’mon,” he directed and pushed himself out of his chair.

Christian followed the doctor’s lead then stopped dead in his tracks before exiting the office. He turned, walked back to Valese’s desk and picked up the pad of Post-its he’d dropped there moments ago. He freed a pen from his pants pocket and wrote down two sets of numbers:

32.77914-96.8086

888

He looked blankly at the numbers, as if they were written in Aramaic. He tossed

the pad onto Valse's chair then left the office.

Chapter 11 - What Assume Means

Valese opened the door to the lobby. "Mrs. Ross? Hi, I'm Dr. Valese. It's nice to meet you."

Becky Ross removed the magazine from her lap and stood to greet her son's doctor with a kind smile.

"Rebecca Ross," she said grasping his hand. "Please call me Becky. It's nice to meet you too Dr. Valese. So, you figure my boy out yet?" she asked sarcastically, glancing over his shoulder at her son.

"Not yet," he said turning to Christian who lazily propped himself against the door. "But I'm working on it."

"He's a good boy," she said. "He just needs someone to talk to. He has his father and me, but I don't think we're equipped to help him with some of the things on his mind."

Christian stood still, listening passively as his mother and Valese chatted about him as if he weren't there.

"I have no doubt that he's a good kid, Mrs. Ross. I've enjoyed talking with him. He certainly has had some fascinating experiences."

Becky's brow wrinkled. "Fascinating experiences?" Looking past Valese, she asked, "What kind of *fascinating* experiences have you had, Christian?"

Realizing he may have spoken out of turn, Valese worked quickly to rectify matters.

"Those are my words Mrs. Ross, not Christian's. Perhaps fascinating isn't the best

word to use.”

Clearing his throat, he turned to Christian seeking his consent to converse with his mother. “Is it okay with you if I mention to your mother that last matter we were talking about?”

“Fine with me.”

“Why don't we go back to my office where we can be more comfortable?”

Christian held the door as Valese led the way back to his office. He offered a seat to Becky while Christian, last to enter, closed the door and returned to the same chair he occupied moments earlier. Valese immediately spied the Post-it pad on his chair, picked it up, and looked to Christian who shrugged his shoulders, revealing his own sense of wonderment with the cryptic note. He put the pad on top of a pile of other papers he planned to tend later that evening.

“This is much better,” he said, politely dividing his attention between the two of them. “I always feel a bit more comfortable talking in here than I do the lobby. I get this strange suspicion that somebody's listening in on me even if no one's out there. It's like being alone in an elevator wondering if you're being watched on a television screen in some back room. Kinda creepy, you know?”

Little did he know, tonight, the lobby offered more privacy than his secluded office.